

# Transit is a bone of contention once more

By IRENE GENTLE  
The Champion

A potential six-month extension of the Town's transit system contract has been put in park, at least for now.

A decision to extend the contract with Stock Transportation Ltd. has been deferred by the Town's community services standing committee until no later than June 21.

The contract expires on June 30. Milton's 20-year-old transit system has been a bone of contention at council for years.

Shrinking ridership and steep operating costs have led some councillors to believe that if the system shouldn't be scrapped altogether, it could at least benefit from an overhaul.

Currently, Stock operates two large Orion buses in Milton at a cost of approximately \$250,000 annually.

That's just too much, said Councillor Wally Hunter.

"It's annoying to the taxpayers when they see those big buses barreling around with no one in them," he said. "The numbers don't justify having two Orion buses driving around empty all day long."

Since 1995, Milton transit ridership figures have dwindled by 43,778.

In 1998, ridership was calculated at 57,078. That's down from 100,856 in 1995.

According to a letter from Stock general manager Raymond Manninen, the system isn't the only thing in need of an overhaul.

The aging buses are themselves in need of repairs that could tally up to \$100,000.

New ways to deliver transit in Milton should be found before the end of 1999, said Mr. Hunter.

"We know which routes are being used, the question is how do you maintain them at a reasonable cost," he said. "There's some common sense decision making that has to be made."

Smaller buses running during peak hours only may be an answer, said Mr. Hunter. Small buses are just as costly as the larger ones, pointed out Town clerk Helen Lisi.

"If we're looking at the size of the vehicles, we can accommodate that," she said. "There are smaller 20-25 passenger vehicles but these are as much capital outlay as the Orions."

It is wrong to expect the majority of ratepayers to subsidize the 150-200 people who actually ride the buses, said Councillor Rick Malboeuf.

He added that the issue has come up on several occasions in the 18 months that he has been on council, without a decision being made.

"We have to deal with this. This has been dragging on," he said. "Will somebody tell me when we'll be able to make a decision on this?"

Much of the hold-up stems from the fact that there is no transit expert on Town staff, said Milton chief administrative officer Mario Belvedere.

"There is no one on staff that has transit capability," he said. "We just don't have that kind of expertise."

A six-month extension of the Stock contract would allow Milton to bring on a director of operations, who would specialize in transit issues, said Mr. Belvedere.

The director could then come back to committee and council with an expert analysis on the subject.

Instead of waiting, Stock should come up with a reasonable transportation alternative for the Town, said Mr. Malboeuf.

"They're either looking at losing the contract or coming back and saying 'we

can do this for \$100,000 if we do this,' " he said.

Transit shouldn't be tossed out because councillors are fed up with waiting, said Councillor Cindy Lunau.

"I think by completely killing transit we're going to seriously change the make-up of this town," she said. "We shouldn't destroy it because we are inconvenienced by another delay."

Committee is looking to change the way transit is delivered, not kill it outright, said Mr. Hunter.

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Wally Hunter

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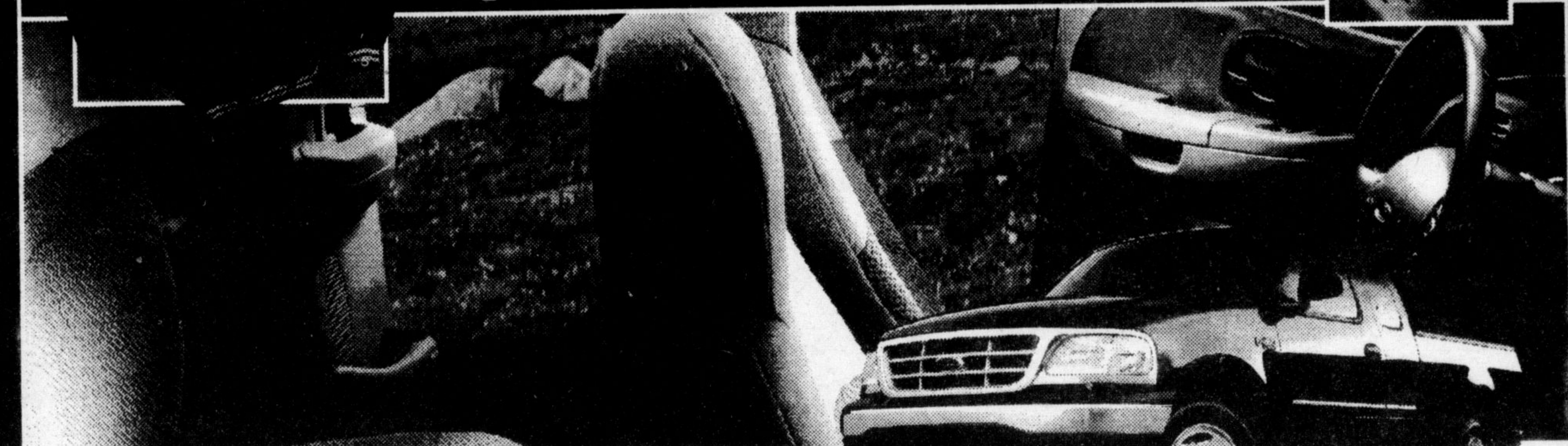
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